TREATING EXCESS BODY HAIR COULD REMEDY A HAIRY SITUATION

Non-hormonal therapies offer patients with hirsutism effective options to control potentially embarrassing body hair

Information presented at American Academy of Dermatology’s 70th Annual Meeting by Sandy S. Tsao, MD, FAAD, Instructor at Harvard Medical School and Dermatologist at Massachusetts General Hospital.

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OVERVIEW:
Hirsutism is a medical condition marked by abnormal hair growth on the face and other areas of the body. While hirsutism primarily occurs in women, sometimes men can develop an increased growth of body hair, too.

In women who experience an increased growth of facial or body hair in unusual areas over a short period of time, there could be an increase in the level of androgens (male hormones), which concerns doctors. If hair growth is accompanied by other symptoms -- especially severe acne flares, increased muscle mass or changes in one’s voice -- that could be the sign of an underlying medical condition. A dermatologist may recommend that the patient be screened for polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), adrenal gland tumors, insulin resistance, and Cushing’s disease (a hormonal disorder caused by high levels of cortisol in the blood). Hirsutism also can develop for unknown reasons or be caused by certain medications.

Fortunately, there are a number of effective non-hormonal therapies that can treat hirsutism:

Electrolysis
• With this procedure, a chemical or thermal injury is used to destroy the hair follicle.
• Each hair follicle is treated individually, making it a tedious and time-consuming procedure.
• Since each hair follicle must be treated repeatedly, this could result in an exaggerated pore size or dilated pores that are permanent.
• The procedure must be repeated on a weekly basis, and the process could take a few years for permanent hair removal.
• Unlike laser hair removal, electrolysis is not dependent on hair type or skin type.

Office-Based Laser Hair Removal
• Laser hair removal minimizes damage to the surrounding skin by only targeting the hair.
• This treatment works best for patients with fair skin and dark, thick hair.
• There are now lasers specifically designed for darker skin, so laser hair removal could be an option for these patients. However, Dr. Tsao cautioned that the procedure needs to be done very carefully in darker-skinned patients, as the melanin in the surrounding skin could absorb the laser and cause dark spots, or a loss of pigment (white spots on the skin).
Non-Hormonal Treatments for Hirsutism

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- On average, six to eight treatments produce an 80 percent improvement in permanent hair reduction.

- If a patient has an underlying medical condition and is treated for excess hair, there is a risk that the hormonal imbalance will convert fine hair to thicker hair over time. In this instance, one or two maintenance treatments may be needed to maintain the hair reduction.

**Laser Hair Removal Devices for At-Home Use**

- While there are a few laser hair removal devices approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use at home, these devices can be expensive and there are some limitations of which consumers should be aware before purchasing. Limitations include:
  - Only approved for use on limited areas of the body
  - Cannot be used for facial hair – only areas with hair from the neck down
  - People with dark skin tones should not use these devices, as they can cause changes in pigmentation (both darker and lighter)
  - The devices can cause blindness if used improperly
  - Hand-held devices can require a lot of treatment time and work better for smaller areas (such as the underarms)
  - If used improperly, the device can burn or blister the skin

**Over-the-Counter Topical Hair Removers**

- These products are marketed for at-home hair removal, but Dr. Tsao noted that they are the most tedious and least effective of the temporary hair removal options. She cautioned that they can irritate and burn the skin, and results only last about a week or two on average.

**Bleaching**

- Some women opt to bleach coarse, dark hair to make it less noticeable. This technique requires upkeep every one to two weeks to keep hair faint.

**Plucking/Waxing**

- Hair removed by plucking or waxing lasts for an average of one to three weeks, but Dr. Tsao noted that each of these methods could cause side effects. Plucking can cause ingrown hair or folliculitis (acne-like bumps); waxing can cause temporary burns or skin irritation and should be done professionally, as it is a technique-dependent procedure.

**Shaving**

- Shaving areas of excess hair requires daily upkeep and in some cases may be needed twice a day, as women may experience a “5 o’clock shadow” effect of facial hair that grows back by the evening hours.

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"If a woman notices a dramatic change in body hair growth or hair growth in an unusual pattern, she should not accept or ignore it,” said Dr. Tsao. “Abnormal hair growth could signal an underlying medical condition, so that’s why it’s important to see a dermatologist for a proper diagnosis. Fortunately, there are a number of safe and effective treatment options for excess hair growth, so there is no reason that anyone should just live with this condition."

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